



# Campaigning for Your Right of Access to Information

A Step-by-Step Guide



**ACCESS INFO EUROPE**

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## Introduction

The right of access to information (ATI) is a right that allows individuals to seek, access and receive information held by public authorities. UNESCO has recognised this right as key to achieving the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and in particular SDG Goal 16 which promotes "just, peaceful and inclusive societies".<sup>1</sup>

A total of 138 UN Member States have adopted access to information laws, which are considered to be "a benchmark of democratic development".<sup>2</sup> However, the simple fact that a law has been adopted does not guarantee that it is in line with international standards. Nor does it mean that the law will be implemented properly in practice.

While the right to information has been recognised in many countries as a fundamental right, in practice problems frequently arise when individuals try to exercise it. Common problems include:

- Weak legal frameworks;
- Poor implementation;
- Lack of awareness of the right.

To start campaigning for proper enjoyment of your right to information, you must identify the specific problems affecting the right in your country. This guide will provide you with the building blocks needed to maximise impact and drive meaningful change around access to information through the following steps:

1. **Understand the barriers & set the objective:** identify the root cause of the problem.
2. **Plan strategic activities:** Choose the best activities to achieve your objectives.
3. **Create a solution-focused narrative:** identify the problem, but focus on the solution
4. **Build a diverse coalition:** engage diverse stakeholders to amplify your message.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unesco.org/en/right-access-information>

<sup>2</sup> Carson, T., Darbshire, H., 2006. Transparency & silence: A survey of access to information laws and practices in 14 countries. Open Society Institute, New York, NY.  
Retrieved from. [https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/sites/default/files/transparency\\_20060928.pdf](https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/sites/default/files/transparency_20060928.pdf)

# 1. Understand the barriers & set the objective

The right to information is your legal right to access information held by public bodies, subject to limited exceptions. This right is essential for the full enjoyment of freedom of expression and is a necessary mechanism for enabling transparent, accountable and participatory governance, the rule of law, and peaceful societies.

This right places both proactive and reactive obligations on governments.

- **Proactive obligations:** require public bodies to publish and disseminate key information about their activities.
- **Reactive obligations:** require public bodies to receive requests for information from the public and to respond, either by allowing the public to view the original documents or by sending copies of documents and/or information held.

Access to information is recognised as a universal human right by numerous courts and international bodies, linked to the right to freedom of expression.

- The **Inter-American Court of Human Rights**<sup>3</sup> and the **European Court of Human Rights**<sup>4</sup> have found that the right to information forms part of the right to freedom of expression.
- The **United Nations Human Rights Committee** has interpreted the right to freedom of expression as encompassing a right of access to information held by public bodies, and that this right has both a proactive and reactive element.<sup>5</sup>
- The **Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents**, also known as the **Tromsø Convention**, is the first binding international legal instrument to recognise the right to access to official documents held by public authorities.

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<sup>3</sup>*Claude Reyes et al. v. Chile*, Judgment of 19 September 2006, Series C No. 151, paras. 76-77: “the right to freedom of thought and expression includes ‘not only the right and freedom to express one’s own thoughts, but also the right and freedom to seek, receive and impart information.’”

<sup>4</sup>*Magyar Helsinki Bizottság v Hungary* App no 18030/11 (ECtHR [GC], 8 November 2016) para 156: “The Court accepts that a right of access to information may arise, inter alia, in circumstances where the disclosure of the information is instrumental for the individual’s exercise of his or her freedom to receive and impart information and where a denial of access would constitute an interference with that right.”

<sup>5</sup> UN Human Rights Committee, *General Comment No. 34 on Article 19 of the ICCPR* (CCPR/C/GC/34, 12 September 2011), paras. 18-19: “Article 19, paragraph 2 embraces a right of access to information held by public bodies ... States parties should proactively put in the public domain Government information of public interest. States parties should also make every effort to ensure easy, prompt, effective and practical access to such information.”

## 1.1 What if you cannot use your right to information?

Successful campaigns start with a clear understanding of the problem that needs to be overcome. Ask yourself: *What are the main barriers preventing me from enjoying my right of access to information?* Common barriers include:

- **Weak legal framework**

A total of 138 UN Member States have adopted access to information laws, which are considered to be “a benchmark of democratic development”.<sup>6</sup> However, the fact that a country has adopted a law does not guarantee that the law in question meets international standards.

As [the RTI rating has shown](#), the quality of laws greatly varies amongst countries and regions. There are still wide variations in standards between the laws adopted across the Council of Europe region. This variation persists even amongst those countries that have committed to common standards by ratifying the Tromsø Convention.

The inconsistency means that some laws are more restrictive than others, whether in scope, exceptions to access, or oversight of the law. These differences directly impact requesters’ ability to exercise their right of access to information.

- **Implementation issues**

In many countries, potentially effective laws are undermined by weak implementation systems:

- **Uneven implementation:** experiments have been conducted globally, including in North America, Brazil, Uruguay, China, England, The Netherlands, Slovakia, and Italy, and reveal that public administrations can exhibit discriminatory behaviours that severely undermine ATI principles.<sup>7</sup>
- **Non-compliance:** Repeated non-compliance with the law by public bodies e.g. overusing exceptions, administrative silence, or lack of proper record-keeping/standardised data, can be a sign of systemic issues that undermine transparency.
- **Lack of resources:** bodies can lack the funds, personnel and technology required to cope with the demand of requests or lack institutional knowledge of transparency obligations under the law.

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<sup>6</sup> Carson, T., Darbishire, H., 2006. Transparency & silence: A survey of access to information laws and practices in 14 countries. Open Society Institute, New York, NY.  
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<sup>7</sup> Vincent Mabillard, Giovanni Esposito, Lorenzo Cicatiello, Giuseppe Lucio Gaeta & Martial Pasquier (01 Aug 2024): Barriers to Freedom of Information: Insights from an Experiment in Belgium, p.10, International Journal of Public Administration, DOI: 10.1080/01900692.2024.2378329

- **Limited public awareness:**

Limited public awareness of the right generates a low demand for information from citizens. If citizens are not using the law, it can lead the law to “become locked into a negative cycle of disuse, neglect and stagnation.”<sup>8</sup>

## **1.2 Link your barriers to your objective**

By first pinpointing the root cause of barriers to transparency in your country, you can set out a linked objective for your campaign. Examples of problem-driven campaign objectives are set out in the table below:

| <b>Problem</b>           | <b>Objective</b>  |
|--------------------------|---|
| Weak legal framework     | Strengthen legal framework to meet international standards.                           |
| Poor implementation      | Improve public body compliance through sanctions, increased resources, training, etc. |
| Limited public awareness | Raise awareness and increase citizen use of the law.                                  |

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<sup>8</sup> Hazell, R. & Worthy, B. (2010). p.353, Assessing the performance of freedom of information. *Government Information Quarterly*, 27(4), 352-359.

## 2. Plan strategic activities

To maximise impact, your campaign activities should align closely with your objectives. Your approach should reflect the national context and the opportunities available for influence and reform.

### 2.1 Choosing the right approach

Key strategies include advocacy, activism, and lobbying. While interconnected, each serves a distinct purpose and can be adapted based on the political and social landscape.<sup>9</sup> By strategically combining these approaches, you can build momentum and ensure long-term success in achieving your campaign goals.

| Activity | Definition  | Examples  |
|----------|---|---|
| Advocacy | People focused: act of persuading specific audiences and/or arguing in support of a specific cause, policy, idea or set of values.    | Research, strategic litigation, legal analysis, awareness raising, education. |
| Activism | Action focused: the use of direct and noticeable action to bring attention to an issue.   | Public campaigns, media engagement, petitions, marches, protests, strikes.    |
| Lobbying | Policy focused: the act of persuading decision makers to take or not to take particular actions on for example legislation or policy. | Meeting with policymakers, participation in legislative consultations.        |

### 2.2 Opportunities for impact

To drive meaningful and lasting change to transparency in your country, align your campaign activities with key political, legal, and international processes. Identifying strategic opportunities in these areas will help create leverage, build momentum, and maximise pressure for reform. Associating your work with established bodies and/or processes enhances credibility, as well as giving you access to support, knowledge and experience from other jurisdictions.

- **Leverage Open Government Partnership commitments:**

If your country is part of the [Open Government Partnership](#), engage in the co-creation process and push for ATI reforms to be included as a formal commitment in the national or local OGP action plan. Additionally, ‘Access to Information’ is currently one of the [Open Gov Challenge Areas](#), offering further opportunities to strengthen transparency commitments.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://commonslibrary.org/what-is-the-difference-between-advocacy-and-activism/>

- **Use international oversight and accountability mechanisms**

External scrutiny can strengthen your campaign. Reference findings from international monitoring bodies to highlight transparency gaps and drive reform:

- [GRECO Recommendations](#) – Use anti-corruption evaluations that expose weaknesses in transparency frameworks to push for stronger ATI laws.
- [Tromsø Convention Access to Info Group](#) – If your country has ratified the convention, check if your ATI law has been evaluated and use recommendations for advocacy.
- [European Commission Rule of Law Reports](#) – Leverage transparency-related findings to hold governments accountable.
- [UNCAC Review Mechanism](#) – Use country reports to support your reform efforts. Focus on Review Cycle 2, which assesses compliance with Chapter II of the UNCAC, including the obligation to ensure effective public access to information (Article 13(b)).

- **Take advantage of legislative and policy reform windows**

Stay ahead of upcoming legislative reviews, policy revisions, or public consultations where ATI laws and frameworks are under discussion. Identify key decision-makers, submit evidence-based recommendations, and mobilise public and political pressure to ensure that reforms align with international best practices.



### 3. Create a solution-focused narrative

When advocating for changes in ATI laws, we often focus disproportionately on exposing problems. We highlight cases of poor implementation, failures by public authorities to comply, and other violations of the right of access to information. Addressing challenges of implementation is essential. But we must also consider the risks associated with constant negative framing, which may:

- create too strong a perception that the ATI law is ineffective, discouraging people from submitting requests;
- undermine public trust in government institutions, painting them as inherently uncooperative;
- cause public authorities to disengage, viewing ATI advocates as adversaries rather than partners in improving transparency.

#### 3.1 Solution-oriented messaging: how ATI strengthens democracy

As campaigners, our goal is not just to expose failures but to drive positive change. To achieve this, we need to shift the narrative - focusing not only on what is wrong but also on what positive changes can be achieved when ATI laws are properly implemented. To do this, we should adopt a hope-based communications strategy.<sup>10</sup>

Instead of solely emphasising problems, we should offer solutions to the problems identified. Additionally, we should emphasise the benefits that public authorities can realise through an effective ATI system, showing how it can strengthen democracy by:

- Building public trust through greater transparency and reduced perceptions of secrecy;
- Encouraging active citizen engagement, leading to a more informed society and participatory democracy;
- Enhancing information integrity by curbing misinformation and speculation through access to accurate, official data;
- Empowering public oversight to identify areas where public services need improvement or reform;
- Reinforcing government accountability, ensuring that officials act in the best interests of society and in accordance with the rule of law.

By balancing problem identification with solution-driven messaging, we can inspire change - not just frustration.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.hope-based.com/about>

## 4. Build a diverse coalition

A strong and diverse coalition amplifies your campaign's influence and increases the likelihood of success. To build an effective alliance, start by conducting 'stakeholder mapping'. In other words: identify key allies and target audiences who can support your push for greater transparency from different angles.

### 4.1 Identifying key allies

Your coalition should include a diverse range of stakeholders, each of which should bring unique strengths to the campaign:

- **Civil society organisations:** provide policy expertise, access to international networks, advocacy skill and experience, and grassroots mobilisation.
- **Journalists & media outlets:** raise awareness, investigate transparency gaps, and hold authorities accountable through directing public attention.
- **Lawyers:** provide legal advice and can take strategic litigation against poor implementation of the law.
- **Academic experts:** offer research and technical policy analysis to strengthen your proposals.
- **Ombuds institutions & information commissioners:** independent oversight bodies that monitor ATI compliance, resolve complaints, promote transparency through guidance and enforcement, can serve as powerful allies in holding authorities accountable and strengthening implementation systems.
- **Private sector partners:** businesses that benefit from open data and transparency can advocate themselves, promote pro-transparency values through their own internal culture and lobbying activities, and provide resources.
- **International organisations:** oversight from OGP, UNCAC and GRECO reviews can provide legitimacy, additional experience, and external pressure.

### 4.2 Turning a coalition into a movement

Building a coalition is just the first step, mobilising it effectively is what drives impact:

- **Define common goals:** ensure all stakeholders agree on key objectives, and keep an up-to-date written record of this consensus.
- **Coordinate messaging:** develop a unified narrative that resonates with the full range of audiences, from transparency experts to citizens.
- **Leverage diverse strengths:** use each ally's expertise where it is likely to be most effective, efficiently targeting decision-makers from multiple angles.
- **Engage consistently:** maintain communication, share regular updates, and always be willing to adapt strategies as needed.

## Conclusion

Access to information is a powerful tool for strengthening democracy, enabling accountability, and empowering citizens. For this right to be fully realised, however, it must work in practice not just exist on paper.

This guide provides the building blocks to help you turn challenges into opportunities by: identifying specific barriers, setting clear objectives, and choosing the right mix of advocacy, activism, and lobbying, you can drive meaningful reform. By crafting a positive, solution-focused narrative and building diverse, well-coordinated coalitions, your campaign can inspire action, foster trust, and unlock lasting impact.